

## GJERGJ FISHTA AND THE ALBANIAN NATIONAL EPIC

by  
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### The author, Gjergj Fishta

Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940) was by far the greatest and most influential figure of Albanian literature in the first half of the twentieth century. It was he more than any other writer who gave artistic expression to the searching soul of the sovereign Albanian nation. Lauded and celebrated up until the Second World War as the 'national poet of Albania' and as the 'Albanian Homer,' Fishta was to fall into sudden oblivion when the communists took power in November 1944. The very mention of his name became taboo for forty-six years.

Fishta was born on 23 October 1871 in the Zadrime village of Fishta near Troshan in northern Albania where he was baptized by the Franciscan missionary and poet, Leonardo De Martino (1830-1923). He attended Franciscan schools in Troshan and Shkodra where as a child he was deeply influenced both by the talented De Martino and by a Bosnian missionary, pater Lovro Mihačević, who instilled in the intelligent lad a love for literature and for his native language. In 1886, when he was fifteen, Fishta was sent by the Order of the Friars Minor to Bosnia, as were many young Albanians destined for the priesthood at the time. It was at Franciscan seminaries and institutions in Sutjeska, Livno and Kreševo that the young Fishta studied theology, philosophy and languages, in particular Latin, Italian and Serbo-Croatian, to prepare himself for his ecclesiastical and literary career. During his stay in Bosnia he came into contact with Bosnian writer Grga Martić (1822-1905) and with Croatian poet Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević (1865-1908) with whom he became friends and who aroused a literary calling in him. In 1894 Gjergj Fishta was ordained as a priest and admitted to the Franciscan order.

On his return to Albania in February of that year, Fishta was given a teaching position at the Franciscan college in Troshan and subsequently a posting as parish priest in the village of Gomsiqja. In 1899, he collaborated with Preng Doçi (1846-1917), the influential abbot of Mirdita, with prose writer and priest Dom Ndoc Nikaj (1864-1951) and with folklorist Pashko Bardhi (1870-1948) to found the *Bashkimi* (Unity) Literary Society of Shkodra which set out to tackle the thorny Albanian alphabet question. This society was subsequently instrumental in the publication of a number of Albanian-language school texts and of the *Bashkimi* Albanian-Italian dictionary of 1908, still the best dictionary of Gheg dialect. By this time, Fishta had become a leading figure of cultural and public life in northern Albania, in particular in Shkodra.

In 1902, Gjergj Fishta was appointed director of Franciscan schools in the district of Shkodra where he is remembered in particular for having replaced Italian with Albanian for the first time as the language of instruction there. This effectively put an end to the Italian cultural domination of northern Albanian Catholics and gave young Albanians studying at these schools a sense of national identity. On 14-22 November 1908, he participated in the Congress of Monastir as a representative of the *Bashkimi* Literary Society. This congress, attended by Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim delegates from Albania and abroad, was held to decide upon a definitive Albanian alphabet, a problem to which Fishta had given much thought. Indeed, the congress had elected Gjergj Fishta to preside over a committee of eleven delegates who were to make the choice.

In October 1913, almost a year after the declaration of Albanian independence in Vlora, Fishta founded and began editing the Franciscan monthly periodical *Hylli i Dritës* (The Day-Star) which was devoted to literature, politics, folklore and history. With the exception of the turbulent years of the First World War and its aftermath, 1915-1920, and the early years of the dictatorship of Ahmet Zogu, 1925-1929, this influential journal of high literary standing was published regularly until July 1944 and became as instrumental for the development of northern Albanian Gheg culture as Faik bey Konitza's Brussels journal *Albania* had been for the Tosk culture of the south. From December 1916 to 1918, Fishta edited the Shkodra newspaper *Posta e Shqypniës* (The Albanian Post), a political and cultural newspaper which was subsidized by Austria-Hungary under the auspices of the *Kultusprotektorat*, despite the fact that the occupying forces did not entirely trust Fishta because of his nationalist aspirations. Also in 1916, together with writers Luigj Gurakuqi (1879-1925), Ndre Mjeda (1866-1937) and Mati Logoreci (1867-1941), Fishta played a leading role in the Albanian Literary Commission (*Komisija Letrare Shqype*) set up by the Austro-Hungarian authorities on the suggestion of Consul General August Ritter von Kral (1859-1918) to decide on questions of orthography for official use and to encourage the publication of Albanian school texts. After some deliberation, the Commission decided to use the central dialect of Elbasan as a neutral compromise for a standard literary language. This was much against the wishes of Gjergj Fishta who regarded the dialect of Shkodra, in view of its strong contribution to Albanian culture at the time, as best suited. Fishta hoped that his northern Albanian *koine* would soon serve as a literary standard for the whole country, much as Dante's language had served as a guide for literary Italian. Throughout these years, Fishta continued teaching and running the Franciscan school in Shkodra, known from 1921 on as the *Collegium Illyricum* (Illyrian College), which had become the leading educational institution of northern Albania. He was now also an imposing figure of Albanian literature.

In August 1919, Gjergj Fishta served as secretary-general of the Albanian delegation attending the Paris Peace Conference and, in this capacity, was asked by the president of the delegation, Msgr. Luigj Bumçi (1872-1945), to take part in a special commission to be sent to the United States to tend to the interests of the young Albanian state. There, he visited Boston, New York and Washington. In 1921, Fishta represented Shkodra in the Albanian parliament and was chosen in August of that year as vice-president of this assembly. His talent as an orator served him well in his functions both as a political figure and as a man of the cloth. In later years, he attended Balkan conferences in Athens (1930), Sofia (1931) and Bucharest (1932) before withdrawing from public life to devote his remaining years to the Franciscan order and to his writing. From 1935 to 1938, he held the office of provincial of the Albanian Franciscans. These most fruitful years of his life were now spent in the quiet seclusion of the Franciscan monastery of Gjuhadröll in Shkodra with its cloister, church and rose garden where Fishta would sit in the shade and reflect on his verse.

As the poet laureate of his generation, Gjergj Fishta was honoured with various diplomas, awards and distinctions both at home and abroad. He was awarded the Austro-Hungarian *Ritterkreuz* in 1911, was decorated by Pope Pius XI with the *Al Merito* award in 1925, was given the prestigious *Phoenix* medal of the Greek government, was honoured with the title *Lector jubilatus honoris causae* by the Franciscan order, and was made a regular member of the Italian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1939. He died in Shkodra on 30 December 1940.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Gjergj Fishta was universally recognized as the 'national poet of Albania.' Austrian scholar Maximilian Lambertz (1882-1963) described him as "the most ingenious poet Albania has ever produced," and Italian poet

Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) sent him greetings as “the great poet of the glorious people of Albania.” For others, he was the Albanian Homer.

After World War II, Fishta was nonetheless attacked and denigrated perhaps more than any other prewar writer, and fell into prompt oblivion. The national poet became an anathema. The official Tirana ‘History of Albanian Literature’ of 1983, which carried the blessing of the Albanian Party of Labour, restricted its treatment of the country’s ‘national poet’ to an absolute minimum:

“The main representative of this clergy, Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), poet, publicist, teacher and politician, ran the press of the Franciscan order and directed the cultural and educational activities of this order for a long time. For him, the interests of the church and of religion rose above those of the nation and the people, something he openly declared and defended with all his demagoguery and cynicism, [a principle] upon which he based his literary work. His main work, the epic poem, *The Highland Lute*, while attacking the chauvinism of our northern neighbours, propagates anti-Slavic feelings and makes the struggle against the Ottoman occupiers secondary. He raised a hymn to patriarchalism and feudalism, to religious obscurantism and clericalism, and played with patriotic sentiments wherever it was a question of highlighting the events and figures of the national history of our Rilindja period. His other works, such as the satirical poem ‘*Gomari i Babatasit*’ (Babatasi’s Ass), in which public schooling and democratic ideas were bitterly attacked, were characteristic of the savage struggle undertaken by the Catholic Church to maintain and increase its influence in the intellectual life of the country. With his art, he endeavoured to pay service to a form close to folklore. This was often accompanied by prolixity, far-fetched effects, rhetoric, brutality of expression and style to the point of vulgarity, false arguments which he intentionally endeavours to impose, and an exceptionally conservative attitude in the field of language. Fishta ended his days as a member of the academy of fascist Italy.”

The real reason for Fishta’s fall from grace after the ‘liberation’ in 1944 is to be sought, however, not in his alleged pro-Italian or clerical proclivities, but in the origins of the Albanian Communist Party itself. The ACP, later to be called the Albanian Party of Labour, had been founded during the Second World War under the auspices of the Yugoslav envoys Dušan Mugoša (1914-1973) and Miladin Popović (1910-1945). In July 1946, Albania and Yugoslavia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance and a number of other agreements which gave Yugoslavia effective control over all Albanian affairs, including the field of culture. Serbo-Croatian was introduced as a compulsory subject in all Albanian high schools and, by the spring of 1948, plans were even under way for a merger of the two countries. It is no doubt the alleged anti-Slavic sentiments expressed in *The Highland Lute* which caused the work and its author to be proscribed by the Yugoslav Communist authorities, even though Fishta was educated in Bosnia and inspired by Serbian and Croatian literature. In actual fact, it is as ludicrous to describe *The Highland Lute* as being anti-Slavic as it would be to describe *El Cid* or the *Chanson de Roland* as being anti-Arab. They are all historical epics with national heroes and foreign foes. In fact, Fishta does not view the Montenegrin Slavs as eternal enemies, rather he sees the hostilities as a result of interference from the Great Powers, in particular from Russia. It is nonetheless the so-called anti-Slavic element in Fishta’s work which was also stressed in the first post-war edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia of Moscow. It reads as follows (March 1950):

“The literary activities of the Catholic priest Gjergj Fishta reflect the role played by the Catholic clergy in preparing for Italian aggression against Albania. As a former agent of Austro-Hungarian imperialism, Fishta, in the early years of his literary activity, took a position against the Slavic peoples who opposed the rapacious plans of Austro-Hungarian imperialism in Albania. In his chauvinistic, anti-Slavic poem *The Highland Lute*, this spy extolled the hostility of the Albanians towards the Slavic peoples, calling for an open fight against the Slavs.”

After relations with Yugoslavia were broken off in 1948, it is quite likely that expressions of anti-Montenegrin or anti-Serb sentiment would no longer have been considered a major sin in Party thinking. However, an official position had been taken with regard to Fishta and, possibly with deference to the new Slav allies in Moscow, it could not be renounced without a scandal. Gjergj Fishta, who but a few years earlier had been lauded as the national poet of Albania, disappeared from the literary scene, seemingly without a trace. Such was the fear of him that his home was razed to the ground and, in later years, his bones were dug up and secretly thrown into the river.

Yet despite four decades of unrelenting Party harping and propaganda attempting to reduce Fishta to the rank of a minor ‘clerical poet,’ the people of northern Albania, and in particular the inhabitants of his native Shkodra, did not forget him. After almost half a century of silence, Gjergj Fishta was commemorated openly on 5 January 1991 in Shkodra. During this first public recital of Fishta’s works in Albania in forty-five years, the actor at one point hesitated in his lines, and was immediately and spontaneously assisted by members of the audience - who still knew many parts of *The Highland Lute* by heart.

## **The Highland Lute**

Although Gjergj Fishta is the author of a total of thirty-seven literary publications, his name is indelibly linked to one great work, indeed to what is perhaps the most astounding creation in all of Albanian literature, the national literary epic ‘*The Highland Lute*.’

*The Highland Lute* (Alb. *Lahuta e Malcís*) is a 15,613-line historical verse epic, a panorama of northern Albanian history from 1862 to 1913 which mirrors the long Albanian struggle for freedom and independence. This literary masterpiece was composed for the most part between 1902 and 1909, though it was refined and amended by its author over the following quarter of a century. *The Highland Lute* is a work of great significance to the Albanian people and, at the same time, constitutes the first Albanian-language contribution to world literature.

In 1902, Father Gjergj Fishta had been sent to a northern Albanian mountain village to replace the local parish priest for a time. There he met and befriended the aged tribesman Marash Uci (1810-1914) of Hoti, whom he was to immortalize in verse. In their evenings together, Marash Uci told the young priest of the heroic battles between the Albanian Highlanders and the Montenegrins, in particular of the famed battle at the Rrzhanica Bridge in which Marash Uci had taken part himself. The earliest parts of *The Highland Lute*, subtitled ‘*At the Rrzhanica Bridge*,’ were printed in Zadar in 1905 and 1907, and were received with enthusiasm in Albania. Subsequent and enlarged editions of *The Highland Lute* appeared in 1912, 1923, 1931 and 1933. The definitive edition of *The Highland Lute* in thirty cantos was published in Shkodra in 1937 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Albanian

independence.

Despite the success of *The Highland Lute* and the preeminence of its author, this and all other works by Gjergj Fishta were banned after the Second World War when the Communists came to power in Albania. The epic was, however, republished in Rome 1958 and Ljubljana 1990, and exists in German and Italian translations.

*The Highland Lute* is certainly the most powerful and effective epic to have been written in Albanian. Gjergj Fishta chose as his subject matter what he knew best: the heroic culture of his native northern Albanian mountains. It was his intention with this epic, an unprecedented achievement in Albanian letters, to present the lives of the northern Albanian tribes and of his people in general in a heroic setting. It was the author's fortune at the time to have been at the source of the only intact heroic society in Europe. High Albania, in the north of the country, differed radically from the more advanced and 'civilized' regions of the Tosk south of Albania. What so fascinated foreign ethnographers and visitors to northern Albania at the turn of the last century was the tribal and staunchly patriarchal structure of society in the Highlands, a social system based on customs handed down for centuries by tribal law, in particular by the Code or *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini.

*The Highland Lute* is strongly inspired by northern Albanian oral verse, both by the cycles of heroic verse, i.e. the octosyllabic *Këngë kreshnikësh* (Songs of the Frontier Warriors), similar to the Serbo-Croatian *junačke pjesme*, and by the equally popular cycles of historical verse of the eighteenth century, similar to Greek klephtic verse and to the *haidutska pesen* of the Bulgarians. Fishta knew well this oral verse sung by the Gheg mountain tribes on their one-stringed *lahuta* and relished in its language and rhythm. The narrative of the epic is therefore replete with the rich, archaic vocabulary and colourful imagery and figures of speech used by the Highland tribes of the north. The language does not make for easy reading nowadays, even for the northern Albanians themselves. The standard metre of *The Highland Lute* is a trochaic octameter or heptameter which is more in tune with Albanian oral verse than is the classical hexameter of the Latin and Greek epics. The influence of the great epics of classical antiquity, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Vergil's *Aeneid*, is nonetheless ubiquitous in *The Highland Lute* as has been pointed out by a number of scholars, in particular Maximilian Lambertz and Giuseppe Gradilone. Many parallels in style and content have thus transcended the millennia. Fishta himself later translated book five of the *Iliad* into Albanian.

Among the major stylistic features which characterize *The Highland Lute*, and no doubt most other epics, are metaphor, alliteration and assonance, as well as archaic figures of speech and hyperbole. The predominantly heroic character of the narrative with its extensive battle scenes is fortunately counterbalanced with lyric and idyllic descriptions of the natural beauty of the northern Albanian Alps which give *The Highland Lute* a lightness and poetic grace it might otherwise lack.

*The Highland Lute* relies heavily on Albanian mythology and legendry. The work is permeated with mythological figures of oral literature who, like the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece, observe and, where necessary, intervene in events. Among them are the *zanas*, dauntless mountain spirits who dwell near springs and torrents and who bestow their protection on Albanian warriors; the *oras*, female spirits whose very name is often taboo; the vampire-like *lugats*, the witch-like *shtrigas*, and the *drangues*, semi-human figures born with wings under their arms and with supernatural powers, whose prime objective in life is to combat and slay the seven-headed fire-spewing *kulshedras*.

The fusion of the heroic and the mythological is equally evident in a number of characters to whom Fishta attributes major roles in *The Highland Lute*: Oso Kuka, the fierce and valiant warrior who prefers death over surrender to his Slavic enemy; the old shepherd

Marash Uci who admonishes the young fighters to preserve their freedom and not to forget the ancient ways and customs; and the valiant maiden Tringa, who takes care of her dying brother and is resolved to defend her land.

The heroic aspect of life in the mountains is one of the many characteristics which the northern Albanian tribes have in common with their southern Slavic, and in particular Montenegrin, neighbours. The two peoples, divided as they are by language and by the bitter course of history, have a largely common culture. Although the Montenegrins serve as 'bad guys' in the glorification of the author's native land, Fishta was not uninfluenced or unmoved by the literary achievements of the southern Slavs in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular by the epic verse of Slavic resistance to the Turks. The works of the Franciscan pater Grga Martić served the young Fishta as a model while the latter was studying in Bosnia. Fishta was also influenced by the writings of an earlier Franciscan writer, Andrija Kačić-Miošić (1704-1760), Dalmatian poet and publicist of the Enlightenment who is remembered especially for his *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga*, 1756 (Pleasant Talk of Slavic Folk), a collection of prose and poetry on Serbo-Croatian history, and by the works of Croatian poet Ivan Mažuranić (1814-1890), author of the noted romantic epic *Smrt Smail-age Ćengića*, 1846 (The Death of Smail Aga). A further source of literary inspiration for Fishta was the Montenegrin poet-prince Petar Petrovič Njegoš (1813-1851). It is no coincidence that the title *The Highland (or Mountain) Lute* is very similar to Njegoš's *Gorski vijenac*, 1847 (The Mountain Wreath). This verse rendition of Montenegro's heroic resistance to the Turkish occupants is now generally regarded as the national epic of the Montenegrins and Serbs. Gjergj Fishta proved that the Albanian language was also capable of a refined literary epic of equally heroic proportions.

## Synopsis of the Epic

The *Highland Lute* is divided into thirty cantos devoted the struggle of the Albanian people for freedom and independence in the period from 1862 to 1913.

The first five cantos, known as the cycle of *Oso Kuka*, are set in the year 1862. Canto 1 (The Bandits) gives a historical survey of Albanian suffering under the Turkish yoke and of the plans of Prince Nikolla of Montenegro to attack Albania. In Canto 2 (*Oso Kuka*), *Oso Kuka* of Shkodra sets out with his forty men to counter the attack. Canto 3 (The Booty) is an interlude in which an Albanian shepherd, Avdi Hisa, is slain by the Montenegrins, thus giving *Oso Kuka* a pretext to take revenge. Avdi's sister bemoans the death of her brother with a traditional lament. The figure of *Oso Kuka* is further developed in Canto 4 (*Vranina*), in which the Montenegrin prince sends his finest men to seize the island of *Vranina* in Lake Shkodra. The poet appeals to the Albanian tribesmen to be as heroic as *Oso Kuka*. The cycle concludes with Canto 5 (Death), in which *Oso Kuka* is defeated, takes refuge in a powder tower, and blows himself and his foes up. The Montenegrin flag is raised over the island.

The second section of the epic, set in 1878-1880, begins with Canto 6 (*Dervish Pasha*), in which a mysterious traveller arrives in Istanbul and pleads with the sultan to save Albania. The sultan seconds *Dervish Pasha* and fifty battalions of soldiers to repulse Montenegrin forces, but the Congress of Berlin prevents the Turks from advancing. Canto 7 (The Congress of Berlin) focusses on the historical Congress of Berlin of 1878, which gives Prince Nikolla free rein to occupy Hoti, Gruda, Plava and Gucia, indeed all of northern Albania down to the Drin river. In Canto 8 (*Ali Pasha of Gucia*), *Ali Pasha* happens upon a fairy-like *ora* in the high mountain pastures who appeals to him to summon all the Albanian

Highlanders to war, and bestows on him magic powers. Canto 9 (The League of Prizren) describes the events of the historical meeting of Albanian nobles in 1878, who gather to counter the Treaty of San Stefano and the resolutions of the Congress of Berlin. They are observed from the high mountains by the *ora* of Albania and the *zana* of Sharri, who delight in listening to the fiery speeches of Abdul Frashëri, Shan Deda, Mar Lula, and Ali Pasha. The noblemen resolve to write a letter of protest to the Congress of Berlin. In Canto 10 (Mehmet Ali Pasha), a new Turkish pasha staying at the house of Abdullah Dreni, invites tribal leaders to Gjakova and deceitfully takes them prisoner. Friends besiege the house in order to free their leaders. Dreni is duty bound by the prerequisites of Albanian hospitality to defend his unwanted guest, and both he and the pasha perish in the fighting.

Canto 11 (The Vampire) provides some good comic relief. Prince Nikolla is at home drinking wine. He chides his wife Milena for believing in ghosts. When she retires, however, Nikolla is himself confronted with the ghost of the slain Mehmet Ali Pasha, who demands that he send forces against Albania. Nikolla discusses war plans with his general, Mark Milani. Canto 12 (Marash Uci), the first to have been written and still perhaps the best known, introduces another protagonist of the epic, the aged Marash Uci. Marash hastens to Çun Mula in Hoti and asks him to summon the tribal leaders of Hoti and Gruda to the Church of Saint John's without delay for a council meeting. Marash Uci speaks before the leaders in Canto 13 (At the Church of Saint John's). The men resolve to take to arms to defend their land, and make Çun Mula their commander. In Canto 14 (At the Rrzhanica Bridge), the Highlanders of Hoti and Gruda do battle with the forces of Mark Milani. The Montenegrins are defeated at Rrzhanica Bridge and Mark Milani is compelled to take flight. Prince Nikolla in Cetinje is informed of the defeat in Canto 15 (The Herald) and is told that Albanian forces are massing at the border.

Canto 16 (The Kulshedra) forms another interlude with a mythological analogy to the main conflict. The Albanian warriors are introduced as mythological beings called *drangues*, in battle with a dragon-like *kulshedra*. Also interwoven into this canto is the song of the maid Eufrozina of Janina. In Canto 17 (At the Grapevine Pass), two of the *drangue* heroes, on their way home through the mountains, are surprised by the advancing army of Mark Milani. They manage to hold the pass with the help of nearby shepherds, and Milani withdraws, sending his men to attack Sutjeska. The *zanas* take up residence over Sutjeska, wait and observe. The battle of Sutjeska is described in Canto 18 (At Sutjeska Bridge), in which Mark Milani's forces endeavour to take Guçia. The grim scenes of battle are interrupted by a lament on the death of Smajl Arifi. In a long and patriotic invective in Canto 19 (Father Gjon), the priest of Kelmendi, no doubt a personification of Fishta himself, bemoans Albanian sufferings at the hands of their Slav neighbours. He then sets off for Sutjeska with the men of Kelmendi behind him. Canto 20 (The Lekas) offers more grim scenes of battle at Sutjeska. In the midst of the fighting, Bec Patani recognizes his Slavic blood-brother Milo Spasi and brings him to safety. The story of their friendship is narrated as an interlude. Night falls over the bloodbath. Father Gjon re-appears in Canto 21 (Mediation). He visits Mark Milani to arrange for a truce in order to bury the dead.

In Canto 22 (Tringa), savage fighting continues in nearby Nokshiq, where the maiden Tringa is devotedly caring for her dying brother, Curr Ula. When the Slav warrior Gjur Kokoti approaches, she shoots him in the chest, only to be shot in the head herself. Canto 23 (At the Farmhouse of Curr Ula) continues with more scenes of bloody battle. Tringa's death is avenged. Mark Milani resolves to call in the army to assist his fighters.

Canto 24 (The *Zana* of Mount Vizitor) provides an idyllic interlude to the fighting. The Great *Zana* is outraged at witnessing the murder of her childhood companion Tringa. She brings the body back to the Alpine pastures where it is buried ceremoniously at the foot of a

linden tree. In a spirit of vengeance, the Great *Zana* calls upon all good men to hasten to the battlefield of Nokshiq. Canto 25 (Blood-Vengeance Exacted), the longest of the cantos, is devoted once again to the savagery of battle, observed from on high by the Great *Zana* of Mount Vizitor and by the *Ora* of Montenegro. Other figures of Albanian mythology are introduced, as vengeance is exacted for the murder of Tringa.

In Canto 26 (The New Age), another interlude, the poet, spending the spring at the Franciscan convent in Lezha, invites the *zana*, his muse, to visit him. The long history of Lezha and Albania are portrayed. After much suffering, a new day has dawned. Freedom is at hand. In Canto 27 (The Committee), we find ourselves in the twentieth century. In 1908, a committee of Turkish pashas gathers in Istanbul to decide the fate of Albania. Hardliner Turgut Pasha resolves to lead a military expedition to Albania to stifle the independence movement. Canto 28 (Dedë Gjo' Luli), set in 1910-1911, focusses on the figure of Dedë Gjo' Luli, champion of the Albanian cause against the Turks. Another hero, Llesh Nik Daka, is betrayed, mortally wounded, and taken, according to his last wish, to the monastery of Rubik to be buried. Turkish forces win the day. In Canto 29 (The Balkan War), set in 1912, the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef warns the sultan to leave the Albanians alone. The King of England invites the Great Powers to London to settle the matter. The final Canto 30 (The Conference of London) provides a humorous description of the gathering of the Seven Kings in London. After much dispute, they agree to recognize Albania's independence. The red and black flag of Albania finally flutters in the breeze over the land of Scanderbeg "like the wings of all God's angels."

## The Translation

Until now, no attempt has ever been made to translate any part of this grand, Albanian epic into English. Indeed, the translation of a work of such 'epic' proportions presents a daunting challenge, not only because of its scope and length, but also because of the poet's strong Gheg dialect, his rich vocabulary, his many archaic forms of expression and the exotic cultural setting. The heroic culture of High Albania and of the southern Balkans in general has its own values and ideals which cannot be easily translated or transposed into those of the English-speaking world, nor do they have much in common with the cultures of the well-known European epics of centuries past. Finding an adequate language and style for the translation has not been an easy task. The Highland Lute has been translated and published in German and in Italian. The German translation by Maximilian Lambertz, made in the late 1930s with the backing of King Zog conveys much of the flavour of German epic verse. It is inspiring but not interlinear. Indeed, Lambertz on occasion used up to seven lines of German to translate and make clear one line of Albanian. The Italian translation, published by Ignazio Parrino, on the other hand, is interlinear, but lacks imposing epic flavour. It offers little more than a prose rendition of the narrative. The translation I have recently completed, made over a three-year period from 2001-2004, now attempts the impossible. It endeavours to provide an English-language version which is basically interlinear, faithful as far as possible to the original, and yet one which hopes to mirror both the exalted, majestic, epic style of the original and the traditional culture of the 'wild' northern Albanians, the last surviving heroic culture in Europe.

It is to be hoped that The Highland Lute of Gjergj Fishta will now take its deserved place among the national epics of Europe.

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